

Chapter Ten -- Abolition Blood

We were Republicans till we went down so far south that there weren't any Republicans to vote for, except in national elections. And even in West Tennessee in 1912 Father was a Bull Mooser.

Most of the people we knew in Kentucky were Republicans, too. Or rather, enough that the district went Democratic about as often as the nation did.

It wasn't surprising, for in the rugged region men had found even before the War Between the States that it didn't pay to keep slaves. And all those my great-grandfather Swetnam had held -- about thirty, according to family tradition -- had died or been freed. In the War most of the mountaineers sided with the Union, with a flaming patriotism. It wasn't till I lived in the South as I grew up that I learned there was more than one side to the war.

Two of Grandma Swetnam's brothers fought in the Union army, Lish an' John Patrick. John rose to be a captain, an' you'll find a good bit about him in some of the histories. But in the family we knew that the real soldier of the two was Lish.

The Patricks lived in Magoffin County, an' how Grandma ever came to marry a man from Blainetown I never knew. But she made him a good wife, an' he was a good husband.

Lish Patrick was a scout, an' sometimes maybe a spy, for I know when he was captured they were goin' to shoot him. He just

about lived on horseback, most of the time behind the Southern lines, an' if it had been modern times he'd have won a top decoration. But there weren't so many handed out in those days, an' all the government ever gave him was the cannon he stole right out from under the nose of a Southern colonel. I mean the real kind, not just the honorary colonels.

We were all real proud of Lish for that, for it took brains as well as brawn, an' plenty o' both.

The colonel had brought a regiment up into the mountains on one of those expeditions like Sherman's march through Georgia. There wasn't any force to meet him except a few home guards who had to dodge, an' the raid was partly to get supplies, an' partly to punish the mountaineers for takin' the wrong side. It wasn't nice, but it was war, fought the same way the Yankees fought it.

The "Rebel" troops, as I was first taught to call them, took about everything in sight. They plundered round several times, takin' horses an' anything else they found. Most of the times the raiders that came in were guerrillas, but this time it was a real bunch of soldiers.

While the Yankees were tryin' to get some soldiers there to chase them back, they sent Uncle Lish Patrick in on scout. He could move through the woods like a shadow, an' he got right up to the house where the colonel was stayin', an' found out all about how strong the force was.

But he found somethin' that worried him, too. The colonel had packed a brass cannon along, an' Lish knew the home guards wouldn't have any cannon, for the main armies had those.

Lish had tied his horse out in the woods about half a quarter

from the house, an' the cannon was on the porch. The regiment was quartered close by, an' was so sure of itself that they didn't even have a guard at the house when the regular sentry went to the kitchen to eat supper. Uncle Lish slipped up to the porch an' managed to get the cannon up on his shoulder an' carry it off.

He was pretty much of a man, for all he wasn't awful big, an' he lugged that cannon to where his horse was tied, but there he met up with trouble. He couldn't get it up on his horse, an' if he could have, it would have slowed him down too much, for he knew it wouldn't be long before they'd be trailin' him.

It was late in the fall, an' Uncle Lish buried the cannon in leaves. He led his horse round an' round a big stump, like he'd got the cannon up on it there. Then he rode off.

Sure enough, the colonel had him trailed when they found out the cannon was gone. But when they saw all the sign at the stump they figured he'd got away with it. After they'd gone he came back with a squad an' carried it off, an' it was given him after the war as a reward for his services.

He came mighty near not gettin' to enjoy it, though. For it wasn't long after he stole the cannon that he slipped through the lines to visit his home, an' they caught him in bed. His wife pleaded with them not to kill him.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the captain told her. "I'd be happy to say we could spare him, an' I'll promise we'll give him a court-martial. But he's done us more harm than a whole company of soldiers."

They marched him off south till they crossed some little river, an' figured they were out of reach of the Yankees. It was

night by that time, an' they camped. They shackled him an' put him to sleep between two soldiers.

Somewhat Uncle Lish got the shackles off an' slipped out without wakin' either soldier, an' he was slippin' out of camp towards the river bank, when he had to cross a fence. The top rail broke with him.

"I never heard a gun in my life that sounded as loud as it did when that rail cracked," he said afterwards.

Everybody woke up an' grabbed their guns, an' as they started shootin' he ran an' dove into the river. It was a clear, starry night, an' he knew he'd make a perfect target when he came up, so he swam under water an' came up in a shadow close to the bank he'd come from. They hunted high an' low, an' finally decided they must have hit him with one of the first shots, an' that he'd sunk. After they gave it up he managed to slip away.

Bad as things were when the regular armies came, it was worse with the guerrillas. They'd rob anybody, an' since the Swetnams were for the Union, the guerrillas were always for the South when they robbed our family. But when they robbed the other side they'd play Yankee.

One day when Grandpa Swetnam wasn't home, a man came ridin' fast, cryin': "Hide your horses. The Rebels are comin'."

Grandpa had a fine young horse they were sure to take, an' Grandma knew he was mighty wild, but she got a bridle on him. She didn't saddle him, 'cause she knew there wasn't time, an' when she jumped on his back he threw her on a rock an' busted her knee-cap. She got right on again, an' that time she got him off up into the hills where she could hide him, but she was always a little lame, afterwards.

The raiders were pretty mad at missing the horse, an' nobody was home except Grandma's mother, who was an old lady. They killed all the chickens they could catch.

One of 'em would wring off a chicken's neck an' then hold it up an' say: "Look here, ol' woman. Watch the abolition blood run."

Great-grandma had about all she could take, an' finally she told them: "I'm not surprised that anybody acts that way that's got mouths like you've got." I guess it was the meanest thing she could think of to say.

One of 'em, who must've been pretty ignorant, looked at her an' said: "We didn't make we're mouths, ma'am." It got the others laughin' an' they didn't do any more harm.

Grandpa Stafford always called Jeff Davis "the old Secesh", but we weren't so strong in our feelin's when I came along but what we'd sing:

I eat when I'm hungry,
I drink when I'm dry.
If the Yankees don't get me
I'll live till I die.

And we never did say a word against Robert E. Lee. For in spite of all the bitter feelings, I guess there weren't many people south of the Ohio River that didn't think Marse Robert was about the best man since Jesus Christ. You just couldn't hate a man like him.

In our singin' we were pretty near neutral by the time I came along. We'd sing:

Hurrah, hurrah, for the Sunny South so dear!
 Three cheers for the homespun dress the Southern
 ladies wear.

about as often as we did:

No more the bugle calls the weary one.
 Rest, noble spirit, in thy grave alone.
 I shall find you and know you, among the good and true,
 Where a robe of white is given, for the faded coat of
 blue.

Maybe it was because the war was over but politics lingered on that I can't remember our ever singin' any but Republican political songs when I was a little feller. Things like:

Ole Massa started out this mornin'
 Like he gwine out to shoot.
 He took his shotgun over his shoulder
 An' his bowie knife in his boot.

Oh, Republicans laugh, ha ha!
 An' the Democrats run, ho ho!
 An' I'll bet right now that the good time a-comin'
 In the year of jubilo.

But sometimes politics came closer to us than just singin'. One time it almost cost Father's life.

That was when Frank Rallett was runnin' for county school superintendent, an' knew he had enough votes in the County Court

to elect him, but couldn't pass the examination. All of a sudden he came up with a certificate he said he'd got by takin' the examination in another county.

Father an' Mr. Elam, who was an old man an' one of the best teachers who ever was in the mountains, decided to look into it. They got to see the papers, an' recognized the handwritin'. Frank had hired another man who could pass the examination to take it for him.

They told County Court about it, an' it was creatin' a pretty big stink, an' looked like it would ruin Frank's chances. So he got a gun an' went to Mr. Elam.

"You write out a statement that there wasn't a word of truth in what you told, or I'll kill you," he said, showin' him the gun. Mr. Elam was an old man, an' a cripple, an' finally he did as he was told. Then Frank took the paper to Father, stuck the gun against his head, an' told him the same thing.

Father was sittin' at his desk gradin' papers when Frank threatened him. He looked up at the gun, an' looked Frank straight in the eye.

"Go to Hell," he said. An' maybe Frank was afraid he might, for he stuck the gun back in his pocket an' walked away.

But it made Father some enemies, an' when he ran for the school board next year ol' Sal Stallins, the old country whore, swore:

"I'll beat Will Swetnam in that election if I have to lie out with every man on Blaine Creek." I don't know whether she did or not, but Father lost.

It wasn't long afterward that Sal got mighty sick, an' she

called in Dr. Al Rice. Al was the town infidel, but he was a mighty good man, an' knew more Bible than a preacher, an' loved to argue Scripture. An' nothin' made him any happier than to puncture some hypocrite.

Sal thought she was goin' to die, an' she got powerful religious.

"Do you mean it this time, Sal?" Dr. Rice asked her. "Or if you get well, will you be like the dog that returns to its vomit, an' the sow that's washed, to her wallowing in the mire?"

"No, Al," Sal said, "I mean it. I've really got religion." But as soon as she got well, she was just as bad as ever.

Al was a Democrat, which bein' taken along with his bein' an unbeliever should have made him a sort of outcast in Blainetown. But it didn't, partly because he was a good doctor, an' partly because he was the quickest man in town with a come-back, no matter what you said.

Since the Democrats didn't win very often, some of the other men in town always loved to tease him.

One time when there had been a Republican landslide, some of 'em asked him: "Al, how do you feel now?"

He looked them right in the eye an' said: "I feel just like a sound grain of wheat in a barrel of rat dirt."

But the best one was when it looked like the Democrats had a pretty fair chance, but they lost.

"Boys," Al drawled. "I feel just like Lazarus. I feel like I'd been licked by a pack of damn dawgs."

One of the treasured political songs in our family we learned from Bird Smith, a hired girl we had once who knew more folk songs

than anybody in the world, even Aunt Lou.

We think she made it up herself after an old feller named Henry Salyers was kidnaped once to keep him from sellin' his vote in a close election. A day or so beforehand, some men got him to go outside the district to do a day's work, an' wouldn't turn him loose till after the election.

The song tells his story, to a plaintive tune, with a refrain:

Oh, Come along ol' Henry
 Let everybody know
 How they stole you from the legtion,
 Not very long ago.
 "My fortune is six farthingales,
 And will not larger grow,
 'Cause they stole me from the legtion,
 Not very long ago."

Whoever made it up didn't know the difference between a farthing an' a farthingale, I guess, for I don't know what six petticoats would have to do with things. Bird, who sang in a fine, nasal tone, always pronounced election like "legtion".

The last political rhyme I remember hearin' in Kentucky before we moved South was when Taft an' Bryan were runnin' for president in 1908. One of the little Democrats of West Liberty told it to Walter:

Taft fell into an oyster can.
 Bryan came along an' sealed him up,
 An' that was the end of the dirty little pup.

But in some ways the best of all the political songs was the Mormon hymn they framed up for the baptizin' when Al Rice lost the election bet in 1896.

"If McKinley wins," he had said to the fellows, "you can baptize me into the Republican party."

After the election they got up a big affair down at the deep hole in Blaine Creek where baptisms were held, and the water was cold in November.

The Mormons had brought in a song the summer before that began:

From all the dark places
Of earth's heathen races,
Oh, see how the swift shadows fly.

The voice of salvation
Awakes every nation.

"Come over and help us," they cry.

Somebody changed it around into a form that was used for years:

From all the dark places
Of earth's heathen races,
Oh, see how the Democrats fly.

The voice of civilization
Awakes every nation,

"Come over and help us," they cry.

A good time is coming,
Oh, tell ye the story,

McKinley elected is he.
And Blaine shall be full of
His knowledge and glory,
As waters that cover the sea.

Then one of the Republican wheel-horses waded out into the water with Al, raised his hand for silence, and said:

"My brother, since you have strayed away too far after free silver, and the Democrats will no longer have you, I now baptize you into the Republican party."

With that he soused him under. And for once, even Al didn't have anything to say.